DISAPPOINTED
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Psalm 23
Matthew 26:36–48

"Yet not my will, but thy will be done."
Not surprisingly, Jesus would rather not go through with it.
Yet he hands himself over. . . . It is important to add that
this does not mean that Jesus' death was the will of God.
It was not God's will that Jesus died, any more than it was God's will
that any of the martyrs before and after Jesus were killed.
Yet we may imagine them handing themselves over
in the way that Jesus did, from Peter and Paul, to Thecla and Perpetua
to Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the nuns in El Salvador.
The prayer reflects not a fatalistic resignation to the will of God,
but a trusting in God in the midst of the most dire of circumstances.

Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan
The Last Week

Confession, they say, is good for the soul. And so I need to make a confession. When I read or hear the familiar Bible story about Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane and the disciples falling asleep, my heart goes out to the disciples. I fall asleep in church. So do many of you, by the way, while I'm preaching, but that's another matter. I understand those friends of Jesus: Peter, James, John. There are times of the day, if I am in the right place—in a slow meeting or in a lecture hall just after lunch—when my body simply announces, "We're going to sleep now—just a short nap." If truth were told, I've been caught nodding off in inappropriate places by family members, colleagues—who for some reason think it's hilarious.

So I understand. They had just come from dinner. There had been wine. They were in a quiet place. It was dark. The evening air was cool, the garden fragrant. Jesus had left them alone. They sat down, reclined, and fell asleep. I understand.

It is, on the other hand, a dramatic and human and important story. In the last twenty-four hours of his life, before he was crucified by the Romans on a Friday afternoon, Jesus suffered deeply, not only at the hands of those who wanted to get rid of him, his tormentors who mocked, ridiculed,

tortured him, but also at the hands of his friends, his dearest, closest friends who had been with him for three years. They had traveled throughout Galilee with him. They had listened as he taught them about a God of love and compassion and justice. They had watched in amazement as crowds began to follow wherever they went. They watched as he touched the lepers, welcomed the unclean, the marginalized, the children, as he healed the sick. When he decided to walk to Jerusalem, they had followed along, frightened now by the possible consequences of being in the capital city. They had walked behind him as he entered the city, riding on a donkey, with shouts of “hosanna” and palm branches waving and cloaks spread in his path. But now, four days later, it was clear that the authorities were going to do something. His arrest, at the very least, seemed inevitable, and it could quite possibly be worse than that. He arranged, carefully, for them to eat a meal together, in a quiet, private place, the night before the Passover began. And during that meal he had broken bread and said, “This is my body,” and poured wine and said, “This is my blood.”

Then the disappointment started. His closest friends started to fail him, just when he needed them most. One of them, Judas Iscariot, their treasurer, had gone to the authorities and arranged to betray him. Jesus seems to have known about it. His closest friend, Simon, whom Jesus renamed Peter, his rock, the one in whose home Jesus perhaps lived, bragged that he would never deny Jesus, would stay with him whatever happened, would die with him if need be. But Peter, before the night was over, would publicly disavow Jesus, deny that he ever knew Jesus—three times, the final time with a curse.

And in the middle of all that, perhaps the loneliest, saddest, most poignant moment of all: after that dramatic meal, that Last Supper, at the very moment Judas was leading a mob through the night with torches and spears and swords to arrest him, Jesus and his friends walked to a lovely garden called Gethsemane. He told them to sit and wait and took the three, the inner circle—Peter, James, and John—further into the garden. And then the most remarkable, the most human thing, began to happen. Jesus became agitated and grieved. It is a powerfully intimate moment of self-disclosure. Jesus has honored his closest friends by sharing his deepest, truest feelings. “I am deeply grieved, even to death,” he said to them. “Remain here and stay awake with me.” “Don’t leave me now. I need you. . . . I need you to be here for me and with me.” This is more—far more—than becoming drowsy during a lecture or in church. This is a man baring his soul, a man who is about to be tortured and killed and knows it. This is a human being doing what human beings do in moments like that, reaching out to other human beings, to dear ones and friends. “Be there. Stay with me.”

And then, going further into the garden alone, Jesus threw himself face down on the ground: “My Father, dear Father, let this cup pass from me.”

“Help me, save me, rescue me.” It is the quintessential human prayer, prayed by all of us at one time or another. “Yet not what I want, but what you want.” “Dear God, is this what you want? Is there no way but this? You want me dead?” And this little story becomes one of the most poignantly human and theologically provocative moments in all of literature. In the church of my childhood, the large stained glass window to the right of the pew in which my family sat, a window I looked at and pondered for years, portrayed the moment—inaccurately. Jesus is posed for a photograph, almost professionally, white robe glowing slightly, the folds arranged perfectly; kneeling; his carefully folded hands on a large boulder; his beautifully illuminated face tilted up, his eyes on God. Beautiful but wrong. This is a man who doesn’t want to die, a man agitated, frightened, a man heartbroken at what is happening around him. And when he returns to be with his closest friends, he’s surprised, angry, disappointed: they’re as good as gone, asleep. Three times Jesus asks them to stay awake; three times he prays the prayer “Let this cup pass, but not what I want, but what you want.” Three times they fall asleep.

It is an evening of bitter, bitter disappointment.

It is also a defining moment theologically. What begins to emerge here is the complete humanity of this Jesus. We believe he was the Son of God. We believe he was God incarnate. We believe that in the beginning was the Word and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. We believe God was in this man. And we believe that he was a man, fully a human being, like us in every way. For 2,000 years Christians have argued, struggled with, sometimes fought over the relationship between the divine and the human in Jesus. Overall, interestingly, it has seemed to be easier for most to understand his divinity rather than his humanness. And so some have concluded that if he was God in the flesh, it wasn’t our flesh, that his humanness was different from ours, that he was more holy than human, that he didn’t worry about the future, that he didn’t become anxious or hungry or cold and tired, that he didn’t hurt and bleed as we do, and when he died, that he did so with a divine stoicism, knowing—as God—how it would all turn out. But here is Jesus, agitated, sprawled on the ground in the darkness, asking God to get him out of this mess, just like you and I might do. And there are his stalwart friends, asleep, just as you and I might be.

It is so utterly human. And so also is what follows—an act of courageous will, not so much a meek submission to a terrible fate as a brave embrace of what was happening and a complete, almost childlike trust in God: “Not my will, but yours.”

A question emerges. Why didn’t God answer that prayer for help? Why didn’t the Father rescue his own Son? Where was God, is God, in all of this? It is the most profound question human beings have ever asked. Theologian

Glenn Hinson remembers praying for a dear friend to recover from heart surgery and, when she did, concluding that prayers for healing were part of it. And he remembers praying for his mother to recover from her illness and, when she didn't, changing his prayer. "No longer was my heart saying 'O God of compassion, heal her.' Now it pleaded, 'O God, don't let her go on suffering beyond human endurance. Let her find her rest in you'" ("Not Giving Up," *Weavings,* July/August 2007).

Should we go on praying for someone who is terminally ill, Hinson asks, and answers, "Of course. We can't not pray." But faith understands that our God is a God who out of love limits God's own power and authority. To create a universe, with a world in it, with people in it, is on God's part an act of self limitation, an act of vulnerability, an act of relinquishing power and control —out of love. Parents do that every time they send a child out the front door and into the world alone or off to college—where tragedy can happen. It's not that God isn't powerful. It's that love changes power—from control to presence.

God doesn't will tragedy. God doesn't will that children suffer. God doesn't will what is happening in Darfur or what happened a few weeks ago on the campus of Northern Illinois University. God grieves with all of us when tragedy strikes. God loves so much that the children of God live in an environment of autonomy and freedom in which good things can and do happen—and bad, evil, painful things. What our faith promises is that God is present in whatever circumstances befall us, that there is nowhere we can go that our God is not with us. "Even if I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me," the psalmist wrote centuries before Jesus. That is what we believe. That is the bedrock of our faith—and Jesus' faith. He was in that valley as he prayed in the garden. He would go deeper into the valley of the shadow of death in the hours ahead. And the assertion of our faith is that God was there, with him, every step, every moment, every dying moment.

As I was thinking about this story and this Sunday, a friend gave me a book: Martin Marty—scholar, historian, and pastor. He said, "It's not an easy book but every pastor should read it." So I did. *Swimming in a Sea of Death: A Son's Memoir*: it's by David Rieff, a journalist, and it's about his mother Susan Sontag's last nine months of life and her battle with cancer. Sontag was a very distinguished writer and intellectual. The book is an unrelenting, unsparing account of a woman dying and her son observing, both of them consummately literate, brilliant, absolutely without faith and consequently without hope apart from a medical miracle, and none was forthcoming.

I admire Rieff's and his mother's integrity and courage. He writes, "My mother experienced no conversion. Her atheism was as solid when she died

as it was in the heady days before her first cancer—even if a few of those close to her tried to inject religion into her burial services" (p. 87).

What she believed in was science, reason. It was her religion, her son writes. She believed in science with a fierce tenacity. And when science did everything of which it was capable, there was nothing. He remembers once when she received a particularly grim report of what was transpiring in her bloodstream that she began to weep on the telephone. "'Say something,' I kept thinking. But I could think of nothing to say. . . . I said nothing. My mind was a doleful blank."

And while admiring the adamant integrity of that, the no-punches-pulled, gut-level honesty, I found myself saying, "Yes, for God's sake, for her sake, at least say something like 'The Lord is my shepherd. . . . Even if I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil.' Say something. At least, 'I'm here with you; I will not leave you.'"

As I prepared this, and as I read that book, a dear friend was dying, very differently. He too was a man of consummate intellect and reason. And after he had come to the end of what medical science could do, he made a good and courageous decision—to stop, to receive palliative care, to correspond with friends and colleagues, to listen to the music he loved, to gather his family, to tell them he loved them, to hear their love and gratitude for him, for his life, to pray with them and for them. I mean no disrespect for the way Susan Sontag chose to die. But his way—out of a life of faithfulness, out of a deeply thoughtful choice to be a person of faith, a follower of Jesus Christ—is the issue, the choice, we all face.

"Dear Father," Jesus prayed in the garden, and those are the most important words of his prayer. Jesus taught about and revealed a God who is intimately close, who can be counted on not to violate our freedom by coming into our lives as a problem solver or rescuer but as a loving presence that will never let us go.

Joan Didion, another very distinguished American writer, lost her husband, suddenly and unexpectedly, and then her only daughter fell to a brain aneurism. Didion wrote about it in a book, *A Year of Magical Thinking*. She is a believer, an Episcopalian; she knows the vocabulary of faith. She flew to California to be with her daughter in the ICU and remembers whispering, "'You're safe. . . . I'm here. . . . Everything's fine.' . . . 'When do you have to leave?' [her daughter] asked on the day she was able to speak. She said the words with difficulty, her face tensed. I said I would not leave until we could leave together. . . . Her face relaxed. She went back to sleep" (p. 96).

"Let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want," our Lord prayed, that most human, most faithful prayer.

And I don’t know for sure, but I think he was remembering words he learned as a child:

> The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil, for thou art with me.

Amen.